

THE MWALIMU NYERERE FOUNDATION



**OPENING SPEECH
BY
DR. SALIM AHMED SALIM,
FORMER PRIME MINISTER OF THE UNITED REPUBLIC OF TANZANIA,
FORMER OAU SECRETARY GENERAL AND
CHAIRMAN OF THE MWALIMU NYERERE FOUNDATION**

AT

THE 1ST INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS CONFERENCE ON AIDS

5TH FEBRUARY 2004
THE UNIVERSITY OF DAR ES SALAAM

It is a great honour for me to have the opportunity of addressing you this morning on the occasion of the opening of the important Conference which has for the first time brought together students from various Universities from different parts of the world to discuss and deliberate on how to carry on the fight against the killer disease HIV/AIDS.

The fact that many of you have found it possible to come to this Conference is an eloquent testimony to your own awareness of the enormity and the gravity of the challenge confronting our collective humanity. It is also, I believe, recognition of your own commitment to make a contribution in efforts to deal with this crisis.

I wish therefore at the very outset to welcome you all to Dar es Salaam and to Tanzania. I also wish to pay tribute to the organizers of the Conference and especially the steering committee for making this meeting possible notwithstanding the various constraints that they had to face.

Your Conference is taking place against the backdrop of certain grim realities:

Everyday, thousands of mothers and fathers have to hold their helpless infants and face the grief of losing a partner and a reality, often unknown, of themselves facing an impending agonising death, and living behind destitute orphans.

Millions of our unborn children are at the moment lying unprotected from HIV infection because mothers cannot be provided with the necessary drugs for prevention of transmission. Increasingly the economies of our countries especially in Africa are stripped of the most productive people including farmers, teachers, academicians, doctors and other health workers, engineers and leaders at different levels whom we have invested our scarce resources to educate.

Indeed, the gravity and magnitude of the HIV-AIDS Pandemic need no overstating. We are fully cognisant of the horrendous statistics and the heart wrenching accounts of its devastation to our people as well as to our social and economic systems.

Currently, the number of people living with HIV/AIDS totals 42 million worldwide. Out of these 29.4 million are in Africa. Globally, the

people newly infected with HIV are estimated at 5 million; 4.2 million are adults, and 800,000 are children under 15 years.

Furthermore, HIV/AIDS is worst among the youth from 15-24. It is estimated that 11.8 million youth are living with HIV/AIDS. And for the past 20 years, more than 60 million people have been infected with the virus and that, more than half of these were youth. Every one of us is at risk of contracting HIV-AIDS, but youth are more so than adults due to their vulnerability, psychologically, physically, socially and economically. Most of our colleges have most students in the age group of 19 – 28, in whom the prevalence of new infections is high, and where they are most sexually active.

From these horrifying statistics, it is obvious that HIV-AIDS is a national, continental and indeed global disaster that calls for our concerted efforts and unprecedented initiatives to contain it. Efforts underway at national and international research institutions have produced neither a vaccine against the HIV, nor a potent cure for AIDS.

HIV/AIDS has continued to kill our parents, our children, our students, our brothers and sisters, our friends and workmates; our employees and employers. Indeed HIV/AIDS has continued to cause

pain and serious suffering to patients and families. It has continued to impose a heavy financial and social burden of caring for the sick, and above all it has continued to leave misery and poverty in its wake.

We have reached a critical point for our very survival. The Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan has aptly described the HIV/AIDS Pandemic as a Weapon of Mass Destruction.

We must, therefore, fight the HIV/AIDS pandemic with all the means at our disposal. We must begin preventing new HIV/AIDS infections by targeting the sexually active population that is still free from HIV. Sensitisation programmes should empower this segment of the population to ensure optimum protection against HIV/AIDS. Those who are HIV positive should benefit from pragmatic counselling and prophylactic treatment against infection to allow them the chance of living a normal life. As our Head of State, President Benjamin William Mkapa has rightly said when launching the Tanzania National Policy on HIV/AIDS on 26th October 2001,

"We must eschew inhibiting taboos and promote open discussion in our families, in villages, communities, and in our workplaces on how to protect others and ourselves. We must seriously and openly discuss

the social, cultural and economic environments that fuel the spread of HIV infection, and the challenges we face in preventing transmission through sexual relations. Apart from protection, we must, also discuss ways to support those affected and infected by HIV/AIDS... We must fight the scourge of stigma."

Coming as you do from different Institutions of higher learning and as youths, I am confident that your deliberations will underscore the primary role of prevention in containing the spread of this pandemic particularly among the youths whose vulnerability is on the rise. For example, every effort must be made to ensure that youth in Africa are aware of this VIRUS. BUT we must go further. WE MUST CHANGE BEHAVIOUR. And in this our greatest resource is young people themselves. We must locate where the young men and women are, whether it be in schools, universities and other institutions of learning, on the streets; every household; every market place; every entertainment place, every football match – the message has to reach: awareness and knowledge and the importance of changing behaviour. OUR PRIORITY should be to create an environment where vulnerable groups can be able to form a social immune system, a social vaccine against the VIRUS through behaviour change. We must bear in mind that experience from a number of countries has taught that the change

in behaviour can reduce the rate of new infections and alter the course of the pandemic.

I need not overemphasize that a very important component of dealing with the disease is to destigmatize it. HIV/AIDS knows no race, ethnicity, colour, social status or geographical region. Anyone who does not take precaution can be infected. We need to provide compassion, love and care to the victims. They should neither be discriminated nor looked down upon. People living with HIV/AIDS deserve dignity and respect, which is accorded to every person. We must be open about this disease. This is the only way we can deal with it. I trust that you will spend some time discussing ways of removing the prevailing stigma.

At the same time it is important to underline that while we remain determined and ever vigilant in promoting preventive measures, the issue of ensuring access to medicine and particularly affordable medicine is critical. Equally important in the creation of appropriate infrastructure that permits accessibility across the entire population. The enormity of the challenge and the stakes involved require an extraordinary and unprecedented mobilisation of resources to fight the

pandemic. In all these efforts, the search for developing an appropriate vaccine needs to be encouraged and intensified.

I appeal to all students and Youths and the community at large to see HIV/AIDS as a great if not the greatest enemy of our times. It is imperative to know that even those who are HIV/AIDS free do live with it apart from seeing it with those affected. We should know that HIV/AIDS is deeply entrenched in our daily lives, in our work places, schools and universities. It is our duty and responsibility to combat this pandemic. Each one of us need to make a viable contribution to fight this menace in order to protect one self and others, to salvage the present young generation and that to follow, and above all to save the collapse of our nations. For the enemy is already in our homesteads. Our duty is to stamp it out with vigour and determination. The alternative is too ghastly to contemplate.

This Conference – perhaps the first of its kind in bringing together students from different backgrounds and nationalities in the fight against HIV/AIDS – offer a unique opportunity to carry forward the struggle against the Pandemic. The war against this killer disease is one we cannot afford to loose. For loosing can only mean further death and destruction. But to succeed we need to mobilise all our

peoples and our resources. Being the most effected, the younger generation, which you here in many ways represent, must be in the forefront of the battle.

I believe that by holding this Conference in Dar es Salaam, the students of our various nations as represented here, are sending an unmistakable signal. This is that they want to be in the frontline of this life and death struggle. It is certainly a very welcome development.

I wish you successful deliberations and now formally declare the Conference open.